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ABSTRACT

Based on a panel presentation at the New England Personnel and Guidance Association meetings in 1966, this report describes a project initiated in response to community need in Roxbury by Harvard researchers and community members. Playroom 81, housed in a local basement, has utilized the aid of neighborhood mothers to provide babysitting services and instruction in arts, crafts, and cooking for minority children from preschool to 12 years of age. In the view of those involved, the project has fostered a more positive self concept for both mothers and children. Moreover, the authors point out, Playroom 81 has turned out to be a useful model for the kinds of activities that should be generated by school-related mental health workers to help the schools function in their rightful role as community agents rather than autonomous institutions. By involving parents, it is hoped that the project can generate this educational responsiveness with the active thrust of the community. (JIB)

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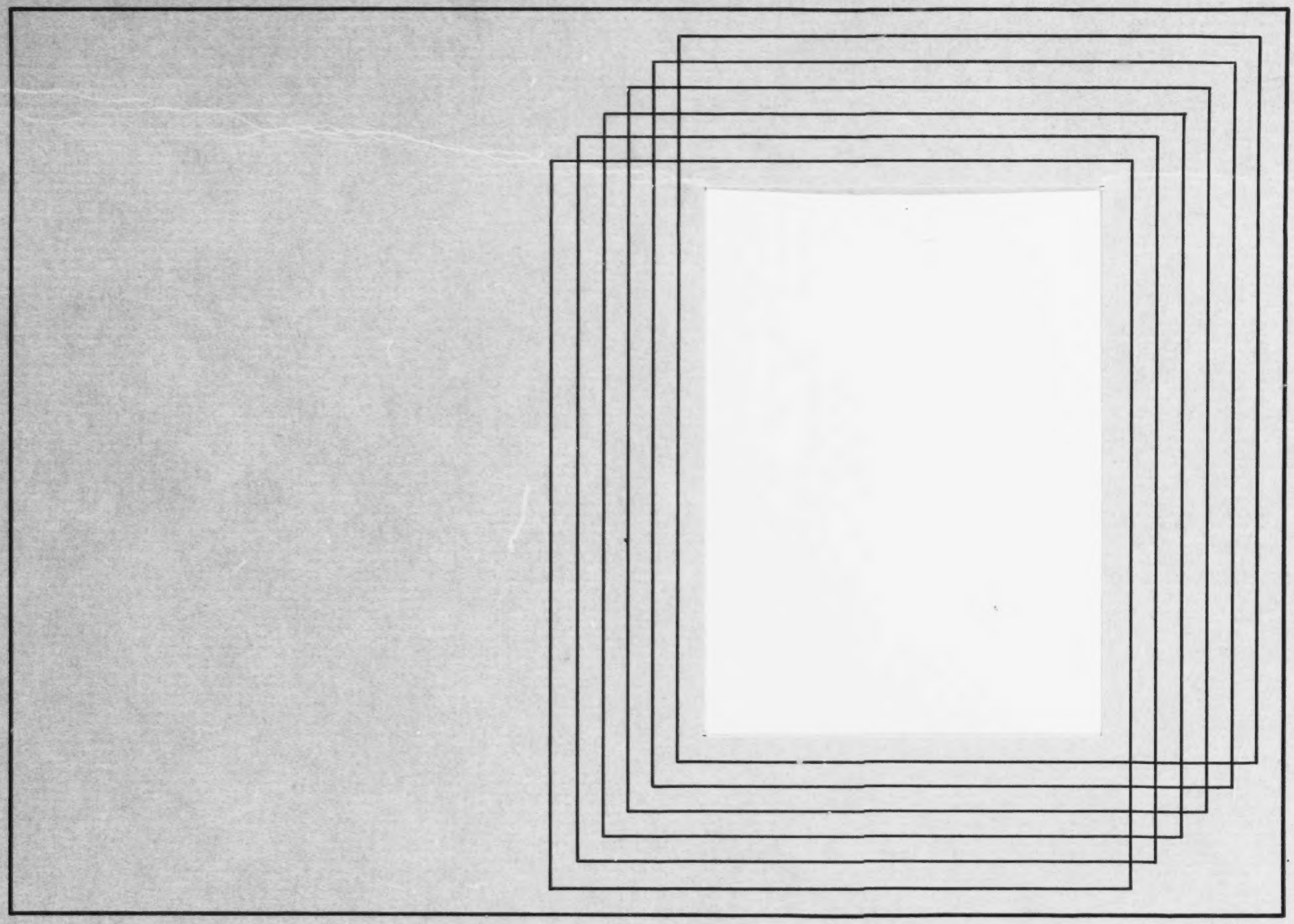

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Occasional Paper Number 2

SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

THE PLAYROOM 81 MODEL

Center for Research and Development on
Educational Differences

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

1967

From a panel presentation at the New England Personnel and Guidance Association meetings, Bretton Woods, N.H., October 4, 1966. Participants are Mrs. Faith Harding, Executive Secretary of the Mothers of Playroom 81, and Robert Belenky, Research Associate at Harvard University and Associate Professor at Boston College.
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Harding: It started about a year ago when the Harvard group came into our neighborhood--Dr. Robert Belenky, Mr. Jonathan Clark and Mr. James Reed. They were approached with suspicion, you know. They wanted to find out just really what was needed in the part of Roxbury where we live--the Mission Hill housing project. And, of course, most of the mothers said, "a place for our children to play." You see there is no play area there and about two thousand families but no place for the children. So we started up a program called "Playroom 81." It consists of ten mothers from the neighborhood--two white mothers from the other side of the project and the rest of them are Negro. We used the basement of the building at 81 Prentiss Street. It was very dingy--just a project basement. We had meetings every day to plan just what we should do. The first thing was to beautify the basement. We all got together and worked on that. The management of the project put tile on the floor. Soon it was just pretty--for the children. There's no use for children to come from one miserable place to another. We made it pretty for them so they could feel more at ease. We have children of all ages coming down to the Playroom now--three and a half year olds to twelve year olds. The pre-schoolers stay around all day and the older ones come in after school. We have a little harder time with them because we capture them when they come out of school. And they're raring to go! You know, they're pent up all

day. Try keeping a female all day without talking, well that's against nature already! But the boys were even more raring to go. It is difficult but we manage.

They come in at three o'clock and we have arts and crafts --in any line that they like. We have one mother who teaches cooking. I was surprised to find that a lot of the children don't know how to cook. I don't believe their mothers let them cook anything. The children thought that it was quite something to learn to bake and make different things. And we have a sewing class. All of these activities might go on at the YMCA or someplace but most of the children we have are young and they can't go out of the community by themselves. We have given them a place to come and we're very proud of it because the mothers themselves put a lot of work into it and it's known around the community. The children themselves like to come down because it's their place.

Another thing that we're trying to do is this: You see, we're between two projects, a white project here and a colored project here. Only a street separates them but people won't cross it. We did get two mothers from the Mission--the white project--and they fit in very well. I believe that they discovered after being there that we all had the same things in mind and were trying to make the same strides. I don't think that their children had ever played with colored children before but the children got along fine,

too.

We also developed a babysitting service because most of the mothers in the community don't have anyplace to leave their children if they have an emergency--like going to a hospital clinic--so we started that service in the mornings. We are expanding in a number of ways and this is one of them.

The poverty program people (Action for Boston Community Development) were interested. You see, none of the mothers had any training at all and with just a little bit of money we did a lot of things. They think that if we mothers got a salary and further training, there's a lot more that we could do. We could begin a training process at the Playroom so other mothers can learn about programs for children and go on to other jobs in this particular line.

Audience: Who did you say does the teaching in these arts and crafts and cooking classes?

Harding: The mothers. The children are divided into age groups. I have the seven and eight year olds. Each mother has age groups like that and has classes for them every day. The mothers themselves do the teaching.

Audience: Are they volunteers?

Harding: They were volunteers at first. We are now getting $80.00 a month from the Commonwealth Service Corps (a kind of state run Vista program). So I guess you might say that we're still volunteers.

Between October, 1965 and January 1966, mothers came down from ten in the morning until five at night for no money. In January the Commonwealth Service Corps stepped in and saw what we were trying to do and gave the mothers a little encouragement to go on. The money did help a lot. The program is much better now than when it started. The children went on trips this summer to places that I've never been to myself. They enjoyed a good summer. I think that we did a lot to prepare them for school, so they can make better progress. I think that the program is moving along.

Belenky: I want to relate what Mrs. Harding has said to some of the ideas about guidance and school psychology that some of us have been working on. I would like us to consider Mrs. Harding's description of Playroom 81 as a model for the kinds of activities that might well be generated by school-related mental health workers. The guidance professions--I am including within this rubric school psychology, counseling as well as vocational and college guidance--have traditionally concentrated their efforts on assessment and appropriate placement whether in school grade, curriculum, college or job. Increasingly, however, schools have become aware of marginal clients--notably non-learners and overly aggressive children. It has become the task of the guidance staff to deal with them, however ineffectively. Habitually, the counselor has worked with each

case separately using group methods on occasion. However, it is only if he asks the question: "Why are there more school failures and 'adjustment' problems in some neighborhoods than in others?" that he is in a position to view the task on a social-psychological rather than on an individual basis, gaining thereby considerable leverage. He might then be able to entertain the possibility that there is something wrong with the way in which the school is dealing with its clients taken as a whole--the way in which the school as an institution is making sense to those it proports to serve.

In Boston, as in most large American cities, education is antiquated and open school-community tensions abound. We decided therefore not to work under the aegis of the school system. But whether the bureaucrats knew it or liked it or not, we were determined to serve the system's clients in order to make schools more effective and education more vital--in at least one Boston neighborhood. Our belief was that by involving local parents in the process of learning, by helping them indeed to become <u>educators</u>, we might generate real educational progress with the sanction, indeed the active thrust of the community. We are not talking about "selling" education as presently constituted, instead we are talking about a collaborative development, a collaboration which ultimately may have to be sold to or forced upon the present school establishment. However, once the school and commu-

nity work together effectively and the school begins to function in its rightful role as the community's agent--in the same sense that a doctor or lawyer is the agent of a given client--it is reasonable to predict that learning and "adjustment" problems will not continue to exist in their present form or virulence. It may then make sense to try to handle them on a case basis.

We are therefore proposing that the guidance worker be hired by some agency--a school, a settlement house, a university or a private community group--to generate pro-educational activities, such as Playroom 81, which will have the effect of broadening participation in and therefore commitment to learning and teaching functions and will also ultimately have the effect of modifying the school's contract with its clients.

It has been very difficult to study what we have been doing in a scientific sense because our "subjects"--Mrs. Harding is one--are entirely aware of the nature of the "experiment." Therefore the biasing effect is no doubt enormous. However, I think that these results may be pointed to thus far: 1) The morale of the mothers has increased; 2) Their feelings of competence and self worth have increased; 3) They've become more sophisticated about education both through in-service seminars and through trips to schools in

Boston and New York; 4) A sense of optimism about what can happen in education has been generated. While organizationally their group has some weaknesses and they have not yet had a direct effect on the local schools, strides are being made in both directions. They are soon to be, I believe, articulate spokesmen of their community to the schools, very much like suburban PTA ladies but hopefully on an even more sophisticated and vigorous level.

Audience: Mrs. Harding, do you have many men involved in your program?

Harding: We don't have many fathers involved because it's a neighborhood with a lot of broken homes so there's no fathers to be involved. It's a suspicious neighborhood because, you see, the people have been told so many times to come on up to this meeting or that place and such and such will be done and then nothing happens. Well, people get tired of hearing these things. Then when something really and truly comes along, they're not interested. It's like crying wolf. But there are a lot of women who are concerned about the children and what is going on in the community. They come around to see what's going with the program. But there's not too many men that are involved, although we could really use them.

Audience: How many children come to the Playroom?

Harding: We have eighty five signed up and about forty come down each day.

Audience: Are many mothers using the facility for babysitting?

Harding: They are not taking advantage of that as much as they should. Boy, I have six children and I wish something like this was going on a long time ago.

Belenky: Mrs. Harding spoke of community attitudes. She spoke of suspicion. There is also the feeling of self worth or lack of it. A kid comes to school with the expectation that it's going to be rough and he's going to fail. It is rough and he does fail. He then becomes not simply someone who has failed, but a failure. With the men joblessness leads to the same sense of failure. Really, everyone is at the mercy of welfare agencies, the housing authority and creditors. All this leads to a kind of endemic depression and doubt about competence--competence to hold a job, competence to read a book and get something out of it, competence to keep control of one's children, competence to make a plan and execute it. A program--any program--which allows people to act on their own ideas and do something elegant on their own behalf is bound to change this expectation. A gradual movement toward optimism about oneself will hopefully occur. Is this not consistent with the traditional goals of guidance?

Audience: Have you seen signs of these changes in self confidence?

Belenky: We have done some intensive interviewing of the mothers. Frequently they talk about how "I used to be just a simple house-

wife who did the dishes and watched television all day long and now I discover that I can add something to the community". Some tell us that they've discovered that they're smarter than they used to think. This kind of anecdote comes up time and time again.

Audience: Have you gotten any feedback from the school?

Harding: We haven't, no but they know we're there. Some of the teachers have come down to see what we're doing. But we haven't had any focus yet concerning that.

Audience: Is there any evidence that children have changed in their attitudes toward school?

Harding: Well, I haven't noticed any, really. I don't know what we can do down in the Playroom to give them a different approach to school when they have to go back to that same routine. I think that our role is to give them something to do when they come out of school and try to put them into a little better frame of mind. I think that's the best we can do.

Belenky: This may be a long time in coming everywhere but the elementary guidance counselor can certainly help simply by getting to know his community and striving to bring learning into focus by, oddly enough, facilitating political cohesion. He should, I think, wander about the neighborhood and get to know the children, the adults and the prevalent attitudes and issues. If he is an employee of the school, it should be his

job to be the school's change agent in order, as it were, to make these attitudes and issues central parts of the curriculum.